



# Future of Work

Knowledge Obsolescence & Shifting World Orders

## Reimagining the World Order

The world is awash with new technologies, being launched by nimble startups and large corporations, on the back of a range of discussions around disruptions, new value creation with consumption models and the ever-present promise of bridging physical and virtual worlds. Alongside these exciting developments, a few questions arise, spanning the economic and socio-political spectrum. While the most notable deliberations are around changing nature of jobs because of automation and artificial intelligence, more mundane conversations demanding that corporations change their entire approach toward managing millennials has constantly occupied our current thinking. Alongside, we have been witness to concerns raised around increasing inequality, stagnation of (wage-driven) incomes worldwide, and replacement of jobs by machines (increasing the push-back on adoption of automation technologies). Meanwhile governments are beginning to come around to considering alternate solutions like universal basic incomes, restructuring public distribution mechanisms and creating new avenues for revenue generation.

Interestingly, many do argue that automation has always been there. Why then is it perceived to be different this time around? The argument is that in the past we had deployed machines to add muscle to human endeavor. In doing so, such mechanization automated routine tasks, which only complimented humans. However now we are not just leveraging intelligent machines, but they seem to be doing completely different and new tasks that didn't exist before. This fact doesn't seem to sit well with people who are beginning to get concerned about what would be left for humans to do when all this reaches a point of no return. The debates around future of work are about this journey.

Doomsday predictions have begun to spring up as it relates to the types of jobs that will be eliminated before the end of this decade. They may seem harsh and disturbing. Yet, somehow the inevitability of it has not yet dawned on people. It is therefore pertinent to take a step back and understand the context in more certain terms. This paper, and the following three papers will center round the facets influencing workplaces, jobs, tasks etc. in a concrete manner. The goal is not to predict the future. Instead, my attempt here is to establish a greater understanding such that we are able to collectively ready ourselves for the future.

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*Pace of invention of new technologies has begun to alarm humans into inquiring about what would be left to do if machines could completely replace humans.*

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## Workplace Ambiguities

Let's set the context first. Talent is changing. Education is abundant. And technologies are creating new opportunities at the learning and deployment ends of the spectrum in a more pervasive manner. Structural changes in the workplace can be painful, but ultimately progressive. Various new techniques driven by machine learning, deep learning, and AI are opening new vistas to gaining business insights. Such tools are also being utilized – particularly in medical sciences - to resolve some thorny issues.

Deployment of such tools in businesses is resulting in greater efficiencies, but increasingly diluting the role of people as a factor of production. While this has a direct impact on “employed workforce”, organizations have begun to deploy off balance-sheet talent through the adoption of an open talent continuum. These shifts are forcing us to reconsider the role of individuals, organizations, hierarchies, accountability workflows, labor laws et al. Re-imagining the workplace is possible. However questions remain on the nature of evolution, unavoidable disruptions, resistance to change, and dealing with lost opportunities. We believe this question is best addressed not by looking at the impacted, but by the forces shaping such changes – changing customer behavior, demographics, globalized marketplaces, virtual platforms and the interactions that take place amongst these forces.

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*Reimagining the workplace will require us to upend our views to employment in radical ways, alongside ensuring inclusivity and socio-economic gains without compromising agility.*

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We believe there are three distinct forces influencing the world we live in today. These forces are shaping the future of workplace and consequently, human behavior within contexts of society and economies. We term these forces as the Briquettes.

### **Briquette 1 – Virreal World**

The past decade and a half has been witness to the convergence of real and virtual worlds, thanks to the vigorous spread of the internet globally. More than half of humanity has access to the internet and is therefore able to navigate both the worlds almost seamlessly. Businesses are transacting virtually while customers consume physically. Self-learning technologies are able to predict consumer behavior far more accurately than previous management models have ever come close to. Supply chains are beginning to look more like homogeneous networks than the distributed, and severely fragmented ones they were designed to be. While there are inherent issues surrounding network effects, cybersecurity, information pandemics, and the rise of digital nomads, these are considered new world problems.

Another half of humanity seems impervious to all these changes, and remains firmly entrenched in an old world where influences from the virtual world are yet to entrench themselves in a beneficial manner. They are however unfortunate victims. To the extent that smartphones have become ubiquitous across most people worldwide, the inherent assumption that they are therefore connected to the virtual world is a fallacy at best, and irresponsible at worst. Distribution and governance systems are yet to be redesigned in a manner that the Virreal world is able to spread its benefits to all, and not just the connected ones.

### **Briquette 2 – Workplosion**

Changes in the workplace owing to adoption of global communications networks is obvious. It is a foregone conclusion that any organization today is awash with a range of technologies and devices, tools and infrastructure to help conduct business in a modern manner. Interestingly however, discussions on workplace modernizations

almost always remain limited to organizational cultures, security policies, engagement of millennials, and leveraging virtual teams for production endeavors, within the context of quick obsolescence with knowledge, shrinking customer loyalty, and challenges with constant automation.

There is neither clarity nor emphasis on more fundamental issues imploding within workplaces. Trends like increased sense of victimization, digital narcissism, contextual deficit, low attention spans, high sense of entitlement, and instant gratification are slowly yet inevitably chipping away at organizational foundations in more ways than one is able to clearly put a handle on. These seemingly detrimental trends are more often than not discarded as nothing more than an inability or unwillingness to change. The deeper factors driving such behavior are neither being examined, nor understood well enough. At another end of the spectrum, moral conflicts surrounding automation and humans is yet to hit mainstream conversations. All these implosions within the workplace will need to be understood, examined and addressed proactively if we are to shape a positive future to workplaces.

### Brique 3 – Borderless Boundaries

Globalization is here to stay. We have heard of this for over two decades now. Proponents have always argued for its increased value, and pursued it with vigor not seen outside war zones. Interestingly however, all such endeavors were more or less pigeonholed around management models that talked about scale, replication, standardization and virtualization. Such efforts may have worked, resulting in more complex networks of organizational hierarchies and reporting structures, alongside reduced degrees of separation.

An often-ignored reality with globalization has been the incremental creeping in of boundaries, manifested predominantly in disappointments amongst customer groups where localization wasn't prevalent, increased lack of trust amongst collaborating individuals and teams within organizations, and a sense of helplessness at the end of it all. The phrase often used seems to be that the "an aggressively pursued multipolar world order has resulted in depravity more than prosperity". While I shall refrain from arguing for or against it, I shall submit that a host of boundaries have emanated from the very nature of our endeavors at globalizing, rationalizing and creating seamlessness. Meanwhile, nation states are beginning to push back on global trade strictures – the very backbone to globalization – owing to issues surrounding mutuality and equality with sharing garnered benefits. Borderless boundaries are a reality today and need to be addressed urgently if we are to make positive strides toward the future of workplaces.

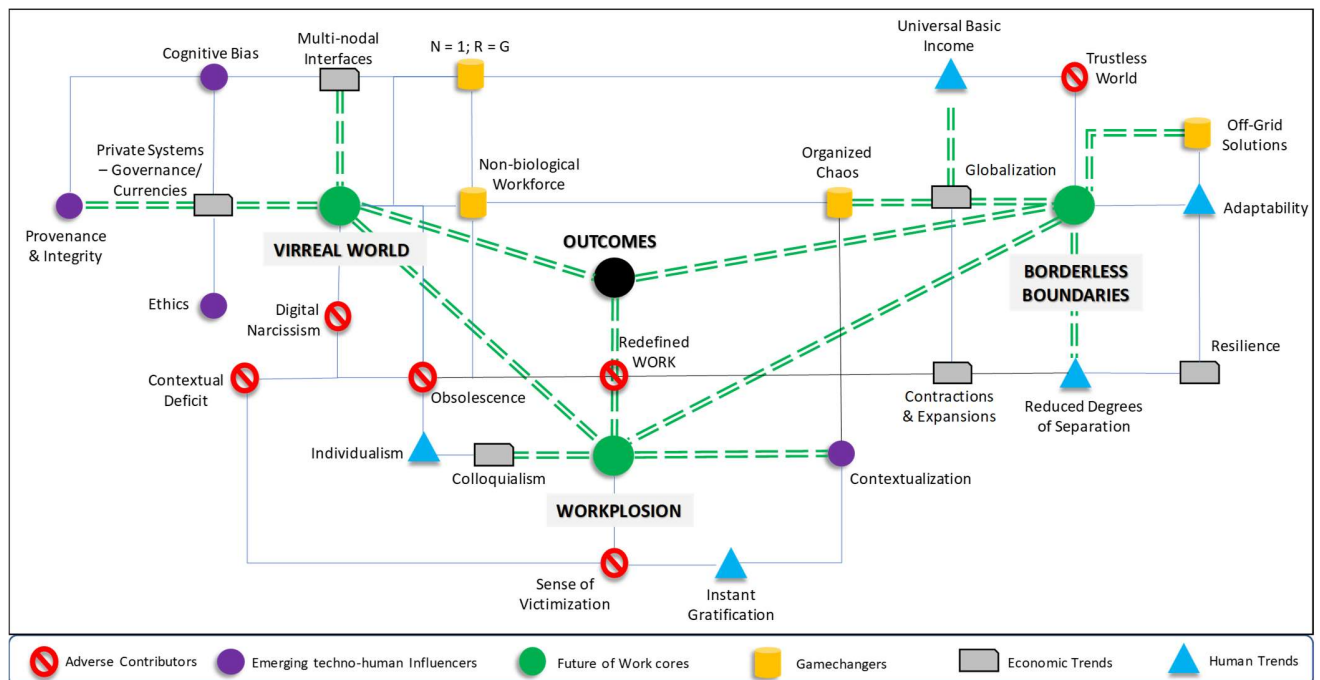
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*Aggressive pursuits for a multipolar world have resulted  
in more depravity than prosperity.*

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### Gazing Forward

It becomes pertinent to envision the multi-nodal nature of various contributing factors to these three briquettes, particularly their direct and consequential impacts on one another, the interconnects, network effects and consequences to workplaces, as reflected in the infographic below.



Each of the briquettes shall need to be delved into in greater detail. We shall be dedicating the remainder of this compendium to distilling these and bring to the fore a range of issues and opportunities that would enable us to collectively reimagine the future of work.

## Virreal World

To understand this confluence (between virtual and real worlds), one must first cogently define each of the two worlds, and subsequently look for facets that enable convergences, or divergences. The physical world has for long been clearly underpinned by three key facets – governments, economies and civil societies. Governments are responsible for establishing rules of behavior amongst the civil society so as to maintain and enhance citizen development while protecting their fundamental rights (to privacy, equality of opportunity, freedom of choice and speech, participation in economic endeavors et al). Civil societies – structured around common interests, origins and shared histories (culture, arts, language, and practices) – remain the source of effort, and target for consumption. The third facet – economics – is where the interplay between the other two is evident: markets are organized, production and consumption structures established, legal and regulatory frameworks determined, and cross-border exchanges undertaken.

## World 1.0 – Real world

For over two hundred and fifty years now, mankind has endeavored at building and sustaining societies based on certain orders, driven primarily by culture and civil preferences, and organized around constraining conditions (that may have their origins either in latent histories, past conflicts, and/ or tradition). Across the planet, such an organizational effort has given rise to a variety of models<sup>1</sup>. Some that have been consecrated to history, while

<sup>1</sup> A range of “organizing models” have emanated – democracy, socialism, fascism, Nazism, communism, theocracy, dictatorships. Some continue to hold sway over large swathes of humanity, while many have been rejected as unsustainable ideologies. This paper will preclude that readers have sufficient understanding of these models.

others continue to thrive. For the most part, the world has adopted variations to the broad language of democracy, which in turn has given rise to the interplay amongst governments, private sector and civil society.

There are six key facets governing the physical world that in turn – combined – offer a veritable smorgasbord of opportunities and risks.

First, **governments** organized by the civil society to govern their behavior have continued to be structured around majority mutual consent (of the governed), translating into legal and regulatory frameworks that in turn act as guidance for orderly establishment of activities and exchanges, both economic and social.

Second, **economies** have been created through structuring productive endeavors that in turn provided gainful opportunities for participating societal members. Exchange of effort for value continue to underpin economies worldwide, where societal needs are met. A range of participants have joined forces to deliver requisite value as perceived by the citizenry.

Third, **culture and religion** have continued to drive a range of acceptable and unacceptable behaviors from all participants – citizenry, corporations and governments. Interactions amongst people within an economy/ nation state are broadly homogeneous<sup>2</sup>. While some distinctions are made within the context of culture, in most cases economic models tend to remain largely impervious to them.

Fourth, **production ecosystems** have been established on the premise of the greatest good for the greatest number, meaning that what is good for one group must be good for others too. Mass commoditization of products, large-scale production of goods and services, homogenized approaches toward building and growing production systems has always been premised on continuous consumption, supported by regulated structures toward competition, value assessments and fungibility of money. Consumption ecosystems have marched hand-in-glove with production ecosystems, thereby creating positive-sum game opportunities for all.

Fifth, **fiscal and monetary systems** that traditionally premised themselves on the maxim “your total value is the sum total of your owned assets<sup>3</sup>” were upended after the second world war, leading to the creation of a new system known as fractional reserve banking. Separation of fiscal and monetary responsibilities reflected the maturity of a nation-state’s governance structure, notwithstanding the fact that this system inherently created opportunities for humans to overplay a given hand<sup>4</sup>.

Sixth, **world trade** that was earlier defined by rampant colonization, asset extraction and slavery, translated into a more orderly behavior among nation states after the excesses of the two world wars. Formation of the United Nations, and subsequently a range of global finance and trade organizations like the IMF, World Bank, ADB, WTO (format GATT), transnational governance entities like the ICJ, ITU, GSMA, other trade groupings like EU,

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<sup>2</sup> We are refraining from delving into specific details that drive micro-behavior amongst societies. A range of factors influence such behavior – race, creed, origins, migration trends, religious affiliations, belief systems, et al as these facets do not lead to a significant deviation from the broad principles of a nation-state’s cultural and social stance.

<sup>3</sup> The Gold Standard that governed world’s total value was abandoned at Bretton Woods, New Hampshire in July 1944. The Bretton Woods Conference, officially known as the United Nations Monetary and Financial Conference, was a gathering of delegates from 44 nations that met from July 1 to 22, 1944 to agree upon a series of new rules for the post-WWII international monetary system. This system came to be known as the Fractional Reserve system that is currently in play globally.

<sup>4</sup> The most consequential example of this issue has been the latest economic crisis of 2008, where enhanced risky models involving financial engineering and securitized lending translated into highly predatory behavior, culminating in a large-scale wipeout of intrinsic value. For the first time in history, humans have begun to question the very foundational principles of our financial and banking systems.



AU, ASEAN, CARICOM, and finally inter-governmental free-trade agreements (both bilateral and multilateral) have collectively contributed to the nature and growth of global cross-border collaboration<sup>5</sup>.

The world has come a long way from its ancient history governed by kingdoms, serfs and servitude. Meanwhile, over the past century mankind has endeavored at significant value creation, through continuous discoveries across a range of disciplines. It may be a safe to state that our species has come a long way, more so in the past five decades that it ever did in the past five centuries. Interestingly however, this world order we have created has now – seemingly – reached a point of maximum utility<sup>6</sup>. Questions are being asked about the continual efficacy of our systems of governance, trade, utility and globalization as a plethora of issues surrounding marginalization, exclusion, poverty, modern slavery, economic discontent, and corruption continue to plague us.

## World 2.0 – Virtual world

For better or worse, humankind seems to have always endeavored at enhancing its lot each new day. Ingenuity and boundless curiosity has continued to underpin our actions as a species, so much so that we seem to be reinventing ourselves continuously. A telling example of this behavior manifests in our maturity where the entire world order is being questioned for its efficacy, and utility. Examining these from a standpoint of the six underlying forces that govern the real world is pertinent.

First, **governments** continue to be structured around collective representation of a nation state's civil society. Yet, the underlying structures, consent-based decision-making, and checks and balances defined by law and judicial prudence, are being upended. Citizens are beginning to chafe at the restraining behavior – overtly and subtly – being imposed on them<sup>7</sup>. The consequences of initiating such strictures may not be understood by many. However there is continual discontent among the intellectual elite surrounding extant intransigence. In a highly networked and virtually connected world, it may not be possible for individual freedoms to survive the onslaught of forced homogeneity as much as the lawmakers may want to impose.

The rise of far-right wing ideologies across the world – both developed and developing – is a telling articulation of the failure among governments to act as mere representatives of the governed. In the absence of choices, citizens continue to push back – with some successes – on limiting environments, thereby making for a veritably complicated and “in-the-moment” implementation of governance. The absence of a long-term focus<sup>8</sup> has further

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<sup>5</sup> IMF – International Monetary Fund ([www.imf.org](http://www.imf.org)); ADB – Asia Development Bank ([www.adb.org](http://www.adb.org)); WTO – World Trade Organization ([www.wto.org](http://www.wto.org)); ICJ – International Court of Justice ([www.icj-cij.org](http://www.icj-cij.org)); ITU – International Telecommunications Union ([www.itu.int](http://www.itu.int)); GSMA – Global System for Mobile Communications Association ([www.gsma.com](http://www.gsma.com)); EU – European Union ([www.europa.eu](http://www.europa.eu)); AU – African Union ([www.au.int](http://www.au.int)); ASEAN – Association of South East Asian Nations ([www.asean.org](http://www.asean.org)); CARICOM – Caribbean Community for Regional Integration ([www.caricom.org](http://www.caricom.org)).

<sup>6</sup> Maximal utility is defined by economics that, when making a purchase decision, a consumer attempts to get the greatest value possible from expenditure of least amount of money. His or her objective is to maximize the total value derived from the available money. Extending this logic to social and governance conditions existent today, we may have reached maximum utility with our entire way of life and the world order we live in.

<sup>7</sup> A case in point is the ubiquitous monitoring of citizens through facial recognition technologies by the Chinese government, and consequent implications on the credit scores, and personal freedoms of citizens. Other nations – like the UK - have implemented some form of citizen monitoring systems, mostly limited to security amidst terrorism concerns.

<sup>8</sup> Policy making for the long-term has taken a big hit globally, resulting in shortsighted approaches toward development. Consequently, people languish at the extremities of economic endeavors, or are seeing their value/ contribution decline to the point that their collective discontent has the ability to organize rebellions, and at worse revolutions. The Arab Spring in the Middle East/ North Africa, crises in France surrounding liberal government, clampdowns in Hungary and Bulgaria in response to the rising tide of immigrants from Africa are just a few telling examples.

added to the perceived misery of citizens in the context of declining lifestyles, ambiguity with their interim futures, job losses and significant sustenance woes.

As inequality increases alongside wealth gains, discontent is growing everywhere. Considerations around building universal basic income (UBI) systems<sup>9</sup> are beginning to gain traction, so as to alleviate the woes of people on the margins of poverty and development.

Second, **economies** hitherto built on the pedestal of consumptive behavior and resource extraction that supported human needs, are being questioned for their inability to create inclusion. Poverty is widespread, inequality is on the rise, yet the controlling levers to shape economic direction seem to be confined to a minority of successful businessmen. The control such individuals hold over an economy are being increasingly questioned by nimble and agile youngsters, more so in the form of creating startups that offer alternative solutions to traditional problems. Exchange of effort for value – considered sacrosanct for a long time – seems to have become secondary to the immediate personal gains of business owners. The dwindling distribution of the “gains” made from such efforts have created significant angst amongst the working populace. Further eroding the trust is the upending of business and operating models around the world.

Technological innovations have been able to not only eliminate inefficiencies from a hop-step-jump system of delivery, but also disintermediate long-standing businesses that worked within supply chains connecting primary producers to end consumers. Increasing unemployment, job losses, and significant underemployment<sup>10</sup> may not only have reduced discretionary consumption, but also changed the view such individuals held toward their existing economic systems.

Compulsory spend – on basic needs – seems to be on the rise despite technological innovations. This has given rise to a small (but increasingly compelling argument) for “off-grid” solutions and adoption. For e.g. solar panel installations and connected homes are helping small communities / micro-societies take themselves off the electricity grid, and instead sell excess production (of power) back to the grid. This conversion of consumers to producers is quite telling. Similar stories abound as it relates to micro-farming and self-sufficient satellite communities around the world. The consequence of such adoption is that society is increasingly disassociating itself from its government, its elected representatives, and by extension, the “common” rule of law that keeps chaos at bay. Are we heading in a direction where economic theory and practices need to be fundamentally revisited?<sup>11</sup> Will nation states will cease to exist the way we know them?

Third, **culture** has for long been driven by mutuality of behavioral code within a community, and shall continue to remain so. Morphing traditional value-systems to suit contemporary norms is not easy (as evidenced globally with various movements like acceptance of LGBT community, gender orientations and rejectionist behavior of various communities). Technology may only be able to influence culture partially. The bigger influence manifests in human

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<sup>9</sup> A variety of experiments with instituting UBI have come to the fore, either as small projects with controlled populations, or as potential game-changing mandates within nation states. Some earlier rejections in Finland and Switzerland do not explain the complete story; while new adoption and experiments in Kenya, Finland, California and India may yet offer a playing field.

<sup>10</sup> World Bank's unemployment and underemployment indices are a telling indicator of this trend. Over 893 million individuals are considered to be in vulnerable employment (i.e. they are bound to lose their jobs soon). This does not include unemployed or unemployable individuals. ([www.worldbank.org](http://www.worldbank.org))

<sup>11</sup> A compelling argument is presented by John D. Mueller in his seminal book “Redeeming Economics” (ISI Books, Wilmington, Delaware). He argues that the original proponent of economics, Thomas Aquinas (1225-74) set forth four basic elements of economic theory – produce, consume, exchange, distribute. Five centuries later, Adam Smith sparked the second economic revolution by discarding two of these elements – consume, distribute. In 1870s, neoclassical economics finally realized the oversimplification by Smith, and restored one element – consumption (theory of utility). Perhaps we need to restore the fourth back again?



mobility. Countries today ready themselves for the onslaught of heterogeneous behavioral patterns, while simultaneously protecting their core heritage<sup>12</sup>. This readiness translates into new (and mostly untested) conditions – legally and otherwise – for all participants. Time is the most crucial factor here that can permit reflection on whether a certain readiness element has been progressive or regressive.

Alongside, a sense of continued ambiguity, lack of predictability and constant “orderly chaos” has begun to push people toward absolutes where constancy is guaranteed. **Religion** stands steadfast in providing a needed assurance that while things are rapidly evolving around, much still remains static. Fundamental overtones with religion have become commonplace globally across all religions today, and rejectionist attitudes abound, particularly around secularism, tolerance, and mutuality of respect. The virtual world has contributed significantly to distributing such belief systems worldwide, thereby enlisting a large and growing populace toward adopting rigid stances with policy or governance. Globalization is at its nadir today as it relates to religious and social tolerance. Meanwhile, the increasing number of non-believers, surrounded by a larger number of traditionalist believers are collectively leaving no room for a rational discourse.

Fourth, an area where technology has had the most profound impact is with the **production** ecosystems worldwide. Disruptions to traditional producer models, combined with complete annihilation of physical supply chains, distribution networks and scores of players that connected to consumers, has upended the view that jobs are a prerequisite to building a productive entity. Jobless growth in many parts of the world has become commonplace, while job losses too abound. Predictability is no longer possible for producer-consumers to imagine their immediate futures. In such contexts, organized / formal economies are slowly languishing, while informal economies – the bane of economic losses – are regaining traction. Implications are clearly manifested in a dwindling direct tax revenue base. Countries struggling to fund activities are continually increasing indirect taxes, thereby overburdening all citizens. The snowballing impact is an increase in income disparity, which has significant political implications for nation states. Rejectionism, anti-immigration, anti-trade (cross-border), communal and other forms of separatist behavior are manifesting non-linearly.

While technology has enabled greater levels of productivity and efficiencies, it has also become fairly exclusive for at least half of the world’s population. “Digital divide” conversations seem quite meaningless, as they only focus on connecting people (yet not on enabling them to become contributing producers, and thereby active consumers). A larger piece to the solution is missing. This gap continues to fuel consternation, withdrawal and angst.

Fifth, the traditional **fiscal & monetary systems** in play worldwide, premised on “single sources of truth” have resulted in an unfettered pursuit of wealth. Predatory behavior with lending and credit systems have for long fueled exclusionist behavior among both producers and consumers, leading to significant wealth accruals unsupported by broader distribution. Controlling entities like central banks and regulators have often erred on the side of producers rather than the consumers. This imbalance has reached enormous proportions, tilting global financial systems on its head. Ingeniously crafted products and services have collectively led to fiscal failures alongside an acceptance that deficit financing models are the only way for economies to prosper. Money creation and supply, resting in the hands of the few and controlled by large producer cartels has further eroded our collective trust in the fractional reserve system of banking.

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<sup>12</sup> Telling examples of such behavior can be seen by nations (a) temporarily when hosting global events – corporate or sport – where huge overhauls are undertaken to satisfy the variegated needs of potential visitors; and (b) permanently, when permitting immigration and resettlement. Culture clashes are abound, yet managed prudently for the most part in a bid to adhere to the world order.

Concurrently, technological innovations in the Fintech world are rapidly – albeit discretely – breaking down the stranglehold of traditional players on economic and financial systems worldwide. A smorgasbord of solutions today vie for space alongside banks and financial institutions. They are slowly chipping away at long-standing norms toward lending and credit, exchange and value assessments, transactions and trade. While many such new players are pushing the gauntlet and seeking out customers, traditional institutions are scrambling to retain their consumers (and consequently indulging such new solutions, with both awe and consternation).

The global monetary system itself is coming under serious pressure. Currency trade, and the traditionally held belief that fiat currencies are the only way to properly establish value in exchange, are being discarded. Virtual and crypto-currencies seem to offer a comprehensive (yet untested) solution to our collective woes. The premise that complete elimination of “single sources of truth” was the only way to build a new future where equity could be assured, has taken firm roots.

Other solutions like private currencies, tokens, stored value devices/ cards are beginning to replicate ancient exchange (barter) systems, where participatory behavior and ubiquity with acceptance / rejection of transactions or attendant value are seen as the most proximate yet poignant alternatives to fiat currencies. Young consumers have easily adapted to this innovation, while traditionalists – governments, banks, institutions, regulators – continue to be wary<sup>13</sup>. The bigger battle here would not be around which system wins. Instead, we believe it may be around the modalities surrounding co-existence.

Sixth, **world trade** hitherto premised on access to markets, products and services in exchange for the same has begun to take a big beating. Continuous revisions to trade agreements has become the norm (rather than the exception) given that the virtual world has more or less eliminated national borders to production and distribution. Alongside, global agreements involving patents, intellectual property rights and related aspects are continually being challenged, to the point that erstwhile protections do not apply any longer.

Notwithstanding plagiarism, there is little room nowadays for organizations to sustain a monopoly or supremacy over a product or value proposition. Technological innovations have again permitted seamless adoption, adaptation and localization of ideas and solutions, much to the chagrin of policy makers. Domestic producers in most nation states have begun to revolt against the tirade of unfair competition from around the world.

Responding to such woes, governments have begun to either renegotiate or completely walk away from traditional trade deals<sup>14</sup>. The consequential impacts to markets, and consumptive behavior are yet to be properly understood. Traditional cartels like OPEC languish on the sidelines, while entities like the G7, APEC, OECD and

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<sup>13</sup> The seemingly misunderstood behavior of crypto-currencies, fueled by the confusion as to whether they represent a “medium of exchange” or “store of value” have led many jurisdictions to clamp down completely, or highly regulate such currencies, and their trade. The anonymity of participants is completely anathema to the traditional “know your customer” model of self-governance instituted since the beginning. Either way, the rise of these currencies, tokens and coins is beginning to take on a serious undertone that they are not just passing fads, but here to stay. Some nations like Japan and Singapore are looking at ways to integrate such currencies into the traditional systems through fiat-pegging; while others are exploring options around running parallel systems. Meanwhile much of the world remains in a state of perplexity around governance, identity and security.

<sup>14</sup> Telling examples are (a) latest battle between the US and China surrounding tariffs; (b) Withdrawal of the US from the TPP, and the diluted rejuvenation as the CPTPP; (c) renegotiation of NAFTA; (d) increasing irrelevance of WTO; and many more.

the UN are being replaced by entities like the SCO, G20 etc., all premised on greater participation from the developing world<sup>15</sup>.

## Conundrum in a Virreal world

The world as we know it is being increasingly questioned for its overall efficacy and utility. While we have endeavored for decades on making improvements to the manner in which our socio-political and economic ecosystems collaborated and created value, the very premise underpinning these ecosystems was never in question, since its acceptance more than seven decades ago.

However, we have reached that point in time, where enhancing the old with the new is no longer seen as sufficient. The belief that the virtual world is a more efficient and modern extension of the real world is being debunked. Instead, the virtual world has almost completely discarded the practices of the real world, and is building the foundations for the rise of a potentially new world order.

The implications to such an order are profound. From a standpoint of how the future of work would look like, none of us have a handle on either the direction, or the goals. We are currently in the blind, more or less swinging with the tide as changes are unfolding. A very small minority of individuals worldwide have a sense of tomorrow, while the majority, including organizations and governments are in the dark about actions to take that could help sustain that tomorrow we are heading toward. Defining, redefining, reinventing or reinvigorating our approaches toward growth, sustenance, effort and value creation have become increasingly ambiguous, and transient. This pertinent situation shall continue for quite some time before any formal structures are established. Meanwhile, it is crucial to remember that the new does not replace the old; instead, it only layers itself on top. Accepting this reality is perhaps the only way we can make sense of the future of work, and all other attendant aspects governing civil societies and nation states.

## Workplosion and Borderless Boundaries

Structural changes in the workforce can be painful, but ultimately progressive as we have been witness to over the past two centuries. The nature of such changes have – in almost all instances commencing with the first industrial revolution – taken the world by storm. Dissent and acceptance followed, inevitably leading to modified and enhanced adoption over time. Value derived from such changes may have, for the most part, been considered incremental. However the impact of such changes have been nothing less than profound for most of humanity – both positively and adversely. We are in a continuous cycle of such change that one doesn't look into it in too much detail. Most initiatives are considered progressive in the long run, hence the need for bemoaning short-term adverse situations or conflicts are not viewed with much care and attention.

This cycle has yielded positive results, as can be evidenced from the nature of human capital management in organizations world over, where structure and discipline, intermixed with cultural and local nuances have been successfully embedded into management practices, while maintaining growth and progress. The latter have become lagging indicators to the success (or failure) of any management practice worldwide. Books have been written, speeches made, theories propounded, mindsets changed, and corporate clones created. Any and all significant progress made by organizations has been variously touted as the result of collective endeavor, or

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<sup>15</sup> OPEC – Oil & Petroleum Exporting Countries; G7 – Group of Seven nations; APEC – Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation; OECD – Organization of Economically Developed Nations; UN – United Nations; G20 – Group of Twenty nations; SCO – Shanghai Cooperation Organization.

team-work and camaraderie, progressive policies or meritocratic management style. We have imbibed this logic without much question, given that the benefits outweigh the collateral damage that may have been caused<sup>16</sup>. One cannot deny the positive numbers on a balance sheet now, can we?

## Factors to production

A range of factors influence production, particularly in times when a globalized world confluences – positively or adversely – with integrated supply chains, access to remote labor, cloud-enabled technologies and competencies. Dependence on fixed-cost input factors is being quickly replaced by “circular” factors, governed by re-usability and fungibility of such factors. The advent of an era where industrial dependencies are being upended has permitted organizations to relook at their business models from two contexts: (a) ongoing sustenance, and (b) future relevance. Today’s capitalistic approaches continue to influence management behavior toward capital and resource allocations, much to the chagrin of contributors that could as easily replace / enhance value to products and services, if only business models could accommodate. In addition, one is witness to the continual demise of business models languishing in the past as their internal rigidities go against the grain of constantly shifting consumer patterns. Obsolescence and irrelevance are fast becoming a norm, rather than the exception.

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The context with traditional factors of production as being less relevant today than before has yet to sink in. Most economies are not ready for such fundamental shifts. A slow, steady and linear progress toward modern agile industrial sectors does hinder the ability to build domestic resilience. Dilution in readiness and wherewithal to absorb external shocks is apparent across much of the developing world. The eventual consequence is a push-back on globalization in its general context, manifested variously in policies, tariffs, cultural rigidities and attendant lackluster competencies. **While information has become extremely fungible, borderless and accessible, knowledge and applicability continue to remain a slave to economies that have preserved resilience.**

These non-linear factors influence production across a range of economies adversely, and spillover into a distinguishable gap between provisioning and expected returns. One principal impact is felt with “human capital” where skills and knowledge are fast being eroded in favor of technological excellence, and replaceability. While most economies have initiated strategies around resource reskilling, much of their effort is limited in its value, owing to presence of a significant amount of uncertainty with predicting future trends. This situation does present more choices than one is willing to take, for the nature of value being pursued is largely unknown from a standpoint of sustenance or continuity. Jobs therefore continue to hold-on to traditional guarantors, confined to command-

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<sup>16</sup> At this point, it is pertinent to emphasize that this collateral damage has manifested by way of employees into “bell curves”, significant disparities in wages tiered according to hierarchy, and also in terms of career progression strategies and executive compensations. The other significant – yet less talked about issue – surrounding wage parity between genders continues to languish on the sidelines. The author however would not wish to dwell into these “tactical” consequences as it relates to Workplosion. Instead, the emphasis shall rest on the larger picture influencing human behavior.

and-control environments, while value erodes. The future of jobs is quite at stake within organizations going forward.

## Tryst with knowledge obsolescence

It's been over a century since mankind has explored, discovered and invented across a wide spectrum of activities leading to a direct impact on human progress. Notwithstanding conflicts between science and theology, or between ethics and cultures, mankind has sustained its knowledge and grown it continually. Much of humankind today leverages such knowledge to produce and consume. The interesting element with such knowledge is that its creation has dramatically changed over the past two decades than in any other time in history. People from previous generations leveraged knowledge gained from education systems for a significantly long period of time (approx. 35 years for those attaining adulthood after WW II), without the need for revisiting their competencies. Fast-forward to today's day and age, knowledge acquired from educational pursuits are becoming irrelevant within a much shorter span of no more than 2 years. This phenomenon leads to continual upheavals with an individual's perceived capabilities in the context of applicability. The need to continuously unlearn and relearn is putting significant pressure on individuals, leading to many exclusions within communities.

One may argue that technologies are enabling, however that's missing the forest for the trees. An individual's worth in a community, in an organization and in society have been, and continue to be assessed by the individual's overall worth – or contribution to economic endeavors. The exclusion is throwing a large spanner in the works, leading to significant woes within people. Most manifested are shifting behaviors toward colloquialism, rising resentment, victimhood, and the like. Meanwhile, what is observed in general revolves in contextual deficit, low attention spans, digital narcissism, and moral conflicts.

These factors have together contributed to significant woes for economies, to the extent that policies are being pushed in the direction of exclusion, while soft barriers to open trade are being increasingly propped up. Agreements like WTO, WIPO et al are being increasingly questioned for their worth and spirit of inclusion. Liberalism is fast being replaced by right-wing thought, fueled by despair and an inability to deal with the ambiguity and uncertainty of immediate short-term futures.

Human endeavor at leveraging technologies significantly are contributing to an uneven distribution of competencies. Modern day slavery is a thought-process governing most young individuals who are choosing to disassociate from established governance systems, calling for fundamental overhauls. What shall give, and what shall remain is anyone's guess. Nevertheless, the interim victim culture permeating economies and civil societies must be addressed proactively by both governments and the private sector.

## In Conclusion

It's indeed a complex world. The three briquettes addressed in the pages above are but placeholders for the varied intertwined nodes influencing human conditions. As we continue to pursue progress, and drive toward greater inclusion of people, societies, industries and economies, we are also contributors to the attendant discord caused by such pursuits. Acknowledging their impacts and outcomes is the first positive step toward envisioning a better, and saner future where humankind co-exists with nature; science compliments endeavors; reason governs actions; collaboration triumphs over individuals; purpose guides solutions; and sustenance leverages collective accountabilities. The change shall continue to remain constant, while agility and flexibility with empathy shall help

us build a future that does not enslave many for the benefit of some. Altruistic though it may seem, there is enough proof that a collaborative effort does indeed enable our societies.